

## July 15, 2008: USCIRF Editorial in Asia Times: Religious Freedom in Vietnam

Say a prayer for  
Vietnam

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WASHINGTON - Days after taking up the presidency of the United Nations Security Council in a long-sought affirmation of its international standing, the government of Vietnam issued dark warnings to Buddhist leaders not to turn the funeral of the 87-year-old patriarch of their banned church into an "anti-government rally".

Instead of issuing threats to continue its abuse of international norms on religious freedom, the government should end its unjustified restrictions on Vietnam's largest Buddhist organization, the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV). In assuming its prominent position at the UN this month, Vietnam should be protecting, not violating, fundamental freedoms.

The latest government threat to the UBCV follows the death of The Most Venerable Thich Huyen Quang, the supreme patriarch of the UBCV and a widely respected champion of freedom and human rights. For his peaceful advocacy, he spent half his life in detention or prison, first under the French colonial authorities, then under the South Vietnamese government, and finally under the communist government. He died on July 5 in the monastery where he had been detained since 2003.

The new presumptive leader, Thich Quang Do, and most other senior UBCV leaders, are also under a form of detention. Even their recent efforts to organize provincial-level charitable and youth organizations have met with government harassment, intimidation and detentions. Hanoi views the peaceful monks' advocacy of freedom and human rights as a threat to government "stability". Millions of Vietnamese, in contrast, see the UBCV as a much-needed spiritual and humanitarian organization.

The death of Thich Huyen Quang offers the Vietnamese government a rare opportunity to honor a tireless advocate for human rights by allowing the UBCV to exercise freedom of religion according to international norms to freely select its own leadership and carry out its activities without interference.

Sadly, this is unlikely to happen.

The US government continues to publicly praise Vietnam for the progress made expanding protections for its diverse religious communities. During a visit to the United States last month by Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, US President George W Bush extolled the Vietnamese government's efforts to advance religious freedom.

Such a statement, however, does not reflect facts on the ground. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent federal body, traveled to Vietnam late last year and met with senior government and religious leaders, including from the UBCV, as well as with members of Vietnam's civil society. At least 30 human-rights, democracy, religious freedom and labor advocates have been imprisoned for more than a year following their arrests in 2007, and others are under constant surveillance.

Religious adherents and communities in Vietnam also continue to experience government interference, intimidation, and heavy intrusive surveillance, particularly those who peacefully advocate for greater religious freedom or seek to organize independently of government oversight. Dozens of individuals are in prison or detention for reasons related to their religious activity or religious freedom advocacy, despite the US State Department's insistence that there are no longer any so-called "prisoners of concern" in Vietnam.

The harassment and detention of UBCV monks and the abuses still experienced by Vietnam's diverse religious communities directly contradict the claim that religious freedom conditions in Vietnam have improved so substantially as to warrant removing the country from the list of religious freedom violators. Buddhism is the primary religion among Vietnam's 86 million people and the continued suppression of the UBCV remains an obvious blight on the country's human-rights record that must not be ignored.

Between 2004 and 2006, the United States designated Vietnam as a country of particular concern (CPC) under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act. This designation requires the US to take enhanced diplomatic action and includes sanctions and incentives for countries to engage the US on ways to protect this fundamental freedom.

Vietnam took several positive steps to expand religious freedom until 2006, when the CPC designation was lifted. Thereafter, religious freedom progress stalled: prisoners remained in jail, new arrests were made, and many of Vietnam's diverse religious communities once again faced restrictions. The Commission on International Religious Freedom found that the Bush administration acted too soon and recommended that it re-designate Vietnam as a CPC.

As the US-Vietnamese relationship grows, the US should think more clearly about how to shape its policies to press the Vietnamese government to cease its severe violations of religious freedom, including the arbitrary detention of dissidents, and to expand legal protections consistent with internationally recognized human rights.

The courageous UBCV leaders and monks and their followers deserve the right to practice their religion freely, without fear of official harassment and arrest, as international statutes provide. American policies and programs should show - in word and deed - that the US stands firmly on the side of liberty, freedom, and human rights in Vietnam.

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